



# THE ORIGIN AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF "THE MEN"

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DR. THOMAS MACLACHLAN, one of the founders of modern Gaelic scholarship, lecturing in the University of Edinburgh about 1866, said: "In every period of its history, even at this day, the Christianity of the Highlands was and is characterised by peculiarities of its own . . . and to have its history fairly before us, would require that it should be written separately. . . . Scottish Church history has hitherto been that of the Scottish Lowlands.<sup>1</sup> A. Taylor Innes also notes and emphasises this element of separateness.<sup>2</sup> It is easily possible to overstress this aspect. The religion of the Evangelical Highlands during the 18th and 19th centuries was just Evangelical Presbyterianism in a Highland setting. But it had its special and characteristic features; and since Dr. MacLachlan's day, a considerable body of literature has been published, which seeks to portray and preserve the native and authentic accent of what Lowland churchmen used, somewhat condescendingly, to refer to as "Highlandism." Probably the best-known of these books are Kennedy's *Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire* and Auld's *Ministers and Men of the Far North*. In this sketch of the "Men" of the Highlands, in their origin and early development, an attempt will be made to show their essential loyalty to the evangelical deposit which they received from the Covenanting Lowlands, through the medium of such men as Thomas Hog of Kiltarn, and at the same time to indicate such elements of indigenous growth as justified Thomas MacLachlan and Taylor Innes, to mention but these two, in stressing a certain quality of "separateness" in Highland Evangelicalism.

DEFINITION.—The "Men" were a definitely recognised, but ecclesiastically unofficial order of evangelical laymen, who won public veneration by their eminence in godliness and supernatural endowments, and to whom alone was accorded the privilege of speaking at the public Fellowship Meetings which were held on the Friday during a Highland Communion season.

Dr. Kennedy explains the process by which a "private" Christian

<sup>1</sup> Celtic Gleanings : Lecture IV.

<sup>2</sup> *B. and F. Evangelical Review*, 1872, p. 413.

became acknowledged as a "Man." "When a godly Highland minister discovered a promise of usefulness in a man who seemed to be truly converted to God, he brought him gradually forward into a more public position, by calling him first to pray, and then to 'speak to the question' at ordinary congregational meetings. According to the manner in which he approved himself, there was the prospect of him being enrolled among the 'Friday speakers' on communion seasons. It was thus that the order of the 'Men' was established, and thus the body of the 'Men' was formed."<sup>1</sup> It should be added that they were called "Men" to distinguish them from the ministers. "Ministers and Men" were the official and the unofficial religious leaders. It may be necessary to explain that the "congregational meetings" referred to by Dr. Kennedy were the private fellowship meetings, usually held once a month, and once common in all evangelical parishes. The "question" was the specific theme of discussion, usually a Scripture text bearing upon the marks of grace in the soul, in such a fellowship meeting.

The "Men" were thus a brotherhood which constituted the spiritual élite of the Evangelical Highlands.

While we may or may not agree with the emphasis which Taylor Innes places on racial factors as an explanation for this development, yet we can accept his statement as a correct description of the situation as a whole. "The tendency to the fostering of a religious aristocracy is as unmistakable in the Scottish Celt as in the cognate races, that have clung to the Latin Church. . . . The distinction maintained between the whole mass of baptised inhabitants of a parish and the few who come to the Lord's Table makes an inner and an outer circle at once. But this by no means satisfies the craving of the popular mind for a 'classic hierarchy,' an esoteric and an outside class. Among the members of the Church in full communion, a few take a special and eminent rank, and become 'the Men' *par excellence*."<sup>2</sup>

The suggestion that they are a distinct and separate spiritual class was sensibly stressed by the fact that the "Men," especially during the period denominated by Dr. Kennedy, *The Days of the Fathers*, generally affected a distinctive dress. A writer in *The Annals of the Disruption* says: The "Men" were frequently to be seen wearing a distinctive dress as a badge of their order—a long blue cloak, with a spotted handkerchief round their heads.<sup>3</sup> They also wore their hair longer than was customary. Dr. Kennedy, while admitting that their dress almost amounted to a uniform, claimed that it was so merely by being old-fashioned even for

<sup>1</sup> *Days of the Fathers*, 1928 Ed., p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> *B. and F. Evangelical Review*, 1872, p. 437.

<sup>3</sup> *A. of D.*, p. 566.

the Highlands.<sup>1</sup> A hostile critic asserted that the cloak, as worn in Caithness and Sutherland, was considered Apostolical. "It formed part of the costume of St. Paul, who left his cloak at Troas."<sup>2</sup> This writer, as well as Gilbert MacMillan of Loth, asserts that the woollen nightcaps or handkerchiefs worn as headgear by the "Men" varied in colour, "the colours marking different degrees of godliness."<sup>3</sup>

ORIGIN.—Dr. Donald MacLean has suggested, with some force, that the order of the "Men" may claim an ecclesiastical descent reaching back to the Culdees, and even to S. Maelrubha of Applecross. Certain families in Sutherland, of the name of Reid (Rubha, Ruadh) traced their origin to the saint, and in certain instances claimed, and in Roman Catholic times were accorded, a quasi-ecclesiastical status.<sup>4</sup> The Evangelical memory of the Highlands, however, did not care to cherish so ancient an ancestry. "The earliest memories of the 'Men,' says Dr. Kennedy, are clustered round the name of John Munro, the celebrated 'caird' of Kiltarn."<sup>5</sup> Munro was a convert and disciple of Thomas Hog of Kiltarn. Hog was ordained and inducted to Kiltarn in 1654 or 1655. He was ejected at the Restoration, but returned to his old parish at the Revolution, and died there on the 4th of January. 1692.<sup>6</sup> Munro's conversion took place during Hog's effective ministry at Kiltarn between the years 1655 and 1662. The ministry of Thomas Hog is of paramount significance for Highland Evangelicalism as a whole. We can trace the impress of his personality on Highland piety during the whole of the 18th century, and even later. To his teaching and practice may also be traced the idea of the "Men."

It is stated that "when a student of divinity in Aberdeen, he (Hog) was boarded in a private house with some well-disposed young men as companions. A probationer exercised a salutary control over these students, and at worship was in the habit of proposing questions and difficulties to them from what he had read, which largely promoted the closer study of the Scriptures and the examination of commentaries. The great profit he had derived from these meetings caused, probably, Hog in after years to originate the praying societies in Kiltarn."<sup>7</sup>

After Hog's labours in Kiltarn had won a measure of success, as evidenced by conversions such as that of John Munro, "he joined the

<sup>1</sup> D. of F., p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> *Quarterly Review*, 1851, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: Reminiscences of the North, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Scott. Historical Review*, Vol. VI, p. 290.

<sup>5</sup> D. of F., p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Bass Rock, p. 90: Covenanters in Moray and Ross, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> *Original Secession Magazine*, Jan. 1887, p. 345: The Religion of the Highlands.



more judicious of his converts into a society for prayer and conference. Their meetings he attended."<sup>1</sup> It is more than probable that, during the Commonwealth, similar praying societies were formed in other parts of Ross-shire. John M'Killigen of Fodderty, for one, was a man of the same school of evangelical piety as Hog, and their parishes were close to each other. Golspie was another centre of Covenanting piety further north. The writer of an unsigned letter dated from Dundee, 8th January, 1651, says: "I perceive from Captain Emson and others that came from thence, that there is a very precious people who seeke the face of God in Sutherland, and divers parts beyond Inverness . . . the Spiritt bloweth where it listeth, and though there were very few in any parte of this nation where ever wee came that would be present at private meetings, yet the people in those parts will rather leave their owne Ministers, and come to private houses where our officers and souldiers meete together."<sup>2</sup>

The origin of the "Men" is thus definitely connected with the rise of the Fellowship Meetings and Praying Societies in the Highlands. They won and retained their place in the religious life of the people through the services which they rendered at the private and especially the public Fellowship Meetings. The fellowship meeting is not of indigenous Highland growth. It was a more or less continuous factor in the religious life of the Lowlands since the Reformation. It will therefore be necessary to review briefly the development of the Lowland fellowship meeting, and to indicate the channels through which it invaded the Gaelic North.

Dr. Hay Fleming traces the origin of the fellowship meeting to John Knox's letter to the Protestants of Scotland from Geneva in 1556, in which he inculcates the diligent study of the Scriptures, and exhorts the brethren to hold weekly assemblies, "while destitute of public teachers." He points out that in the old editions of the Order of Geneva, it was laid down that: "Every week . . . the congregation assemble to hear some place of Scripture orderly expounded; at which time it is lawful for every man to speak or enquire as God shall move his heart and the text minister occasion."<sup>3</sup> "Previous to the Reformation," says Dr. MacMillan, "it had been customary for the Protestants to meet in private houses for mutual edification and united worship."<sup>4</sup>

While the practice died out in Scotland, it was revived in Ireland by exiled Scots who were accustomed, after their own ministers had been

<sup>1</sup> *Original Secession Magazine*, Jan. 1887, p. 347: Memorials of C. Munro of Strathy, App. A.

<sup>2</sup> Scotland and the Commonwealth, p. 31 (S. H. S.).

<sup>3</sup> *Original Secession Magazine*, 1879.

<sup>4</sup> Hepburn and the Hebronites, p. 39: Baillie's *Letters*, I, p. 240.

banished from that country, "to comfort themselves with prayer and reading and other exercises of religion, whiles in the night, whiles in the day, as they had occasion."<sup>1</sup> In the period prior to the Second Reformation, the movement, now to a certain degree infected "with Brownist or Independent notions,"<sup>2</sup> spread to Scotland from Ireland.

During the period of the Covenanting ascendancy, the fellowship meetings or praying societies had assumed such a character that they earned the opposition of Alexander Henderson and David Calderwood; Samuel Rutherford, Robert Blair, David Dickson, and John Livingstone were, however, well-disposed to them. Rutherford was wont to quote in their support the texts James v, 16 and Malachi iii, 16. These texts continued to be used in the Highlands as Scripture proofs for the lawfulness of fellowship meetings. The General Assembly Act of 1641 "Against Impiety and Schisms" embodied Henderson's views; while in 1647, the General Assembly virtually prohibited such meetings "as tending to the hindrance of the religious exercise of each familie by itself, to the prejudice of the publike ministry, to the renting of particular congregations, and in progresse of time of the whole Kirk."<sup>3</sup>

During the Restoration Episcopacy, "the non-hearers of curates united for worship."<sup>4</sup> In fact, during that period, it was abundantly demonstrated that the praying society was the spiritual kernel of the resistance to religious oppression. In the organisation of the United Societies, the followers of Richard Cameron created a church in embryo. The machinery of the Association, the Correspondence and the General Meeting served to knit the individual praying societies into an articulated whole.

Apart from the United Societies, who were avowedly in opposition to the Establishment, whether Episcopalian or Presbyterian, "other societies whose members were not so extreme in their opinions remained in an independent position . . . some of them put themselves under Hepburn's leadership after the Revolution. Some groups continued outside either organisation, and Boston of Ettrick refers to societies in Gala-shiels, the members of which appear to have been members of the National Church and not separatists."<sup>5</sup> After the Revolution, these societies within the Establishment, according to Dr. Hay Fleming, "consisted of a few individuals who met in private houses on some week-day evening,

<sup>1</sup> Hepburn and the Hebronites, p. 39; Baillie's *Letters*, I, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> *Original Secession Magazine*, Jan. 1879.

<sup>3</sup> G. A., 1647: Act controlling "Secret and Private Worship."

<sup>4</sup> John Hepburn and the Hebronites, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

except when the incumbent of the parish happened to be a conformed Episcopalian, or unevangelical Presbyterian, in which case they met during the Sabbath day during the hours of worship, but still in small numbers, and in great privacy. In all other instances, they attended ordinances in the churches of the parishes in which they resided, the ministers of which very frequently attended their meetings. . . . These (meetings) were the remote origin of many Secession congregations."<sup>1</sup> The following definition would be correct for all the Lowland praying societies: "a lesser or greater number of private persons, or at least acting in a private station, professors of the true religion, meeting together in some fit place, for prayer, Christian converse, reading, or other duties of the communion of saints, at stated and occasional times, for spiritual benefit and edification, and for the glory of God as the last end."<sup>2</sup>

For an account of the rules governing these societies, the manner of conducting their business, and also the themes which were sometimes discussed, one may be referred to Hay Fleming's paper on the "Praying Society of St. Andrew's, 1717-1733," Prof. Watt's paper on "Praying Societies in the 18th Century," and Dr. MacMillan's "John Hepburn and the Hebronites." These give the references to the original sources.<sup>3</sup> Their characteristic features may be briefly summarised. The societies were strictly limited as to numbers, 10 or 12 being the probable average. There was no canvassing for membership, and no new members were admitted without earnest scrutiny and the consent of the brethren as a whole. The meetings were held in secret, and it was an offence to disclose the business to a non-member. The society exercised discipline over its members, though they disclaimed intrusion into the province of church discipline. The themes of discussion showed a wide theological interest.

It has already been stated that the ministry of Thomas Hog, both before and after his ejection from Kiltarn, was of prime significance for our subject. It is of interest, therefore, to note that Hog was held in high respect by the Lowland societies to which we have been referring, and that his advice was valued and sought at a critical juncture in their history. "In November, 1691, another meeting of Cameronians was held at Leadhills . . . at this meeting it was agreed to interview Mr. Hog that they might have the benefit of his advice."<sup>4</sup> If the desired advice

<sup>1</sup> *Original Secession Magazine*, Jan. 1879, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Original Secession Magazine*, Feb. 1934, p. 51: Praying Societies of 18th Century.

<sup>3</sup> Especially "Rules and Directions for Fellowship Meetings; by the Rev. Mr. John Hepburn, late Minr. at Urr in Galloway," Edin., 1756: *Humble Pleadings for the Good Old Way*, Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Hepburn and the Hebronites, p. 46: Wodrow's *Analecta*, I, 203.



was connected with the attitude of the United Societies to the National Church, it was not taken, for Hog returned to his place in the Establishment, while the Cameronians stayed outside. It is sufficient here to stress the fact that Hog, the spiritual father of the "Men," was regarded as an eminent leader by the Society people of the Lowlands.

As Hog impressed his own spirit so marvellously upon the northern tradition of Highland Evangelicalism, it were well to note the salient features of his character. He was, of course, a Protester; but he appears to have compelled even his enemies to acknowledge him as a man of God. In prayer "he was most solemn and fervent, the profoundest Reverence, the lowest Submission, and yet marvellous boldness and Intimacy with God, attended his Engagements in this exercise. It might be truly said of him, as of Luther, when he prayed, it was *tanta reverentia ut si Deo, et tanta fiducia, ut si amico*."<sup>1</sup> The "Men," as a class, inherited this reverent, yet intimate liberty in prayer. Again, we note his extreme stringency in dealing with candidates for Baptism and Holy Communion. While most searching in his examination of applicants for Baptism, as instanced in the case of John Munro, who owed his conversion to Hog's severe dealing with him on that occasion, he was "fully more strict in his admission to the Lord's Supper, which was the reason he did not dispense that ordinance for several years after he was settled"; and on the first celebration of Communion, "he proceeded with the greatest caution, allowing none to communicate who could not give some tolerable satisfying account of a work of grace upon their souls."<sup>2</sup> The "Men" learnt this lesson to such purpose that the Lord's Table became, in the northern Evangelical parishes, very largely an empty table. Hog's conversion, catastrophic in character, with severe and prolonged "law-work" followed by the gradual attainment of peace of conscience, and conscious acceptance with God, as exemplified also in the conversion experience of his disciple, John Munro, became the "Men's" norm and standard of a truly "gracious change." The "Abstract of Mr. Hog's manner of dealing with persons under conviction," which is printed as an appendix to his Memoirs, is arranged under five major headings, and eighteen sub-headings. Each of the headings and sub-headings represents a necessary element in the true conversion experience. The "Abstract" is the work of an artist in soul-analysis. Whatever native tendency the Highlander may have had towards an undue spiritual subjectivism, and whatever native talent he may have possessed for dwelling upon, and valuing the finer shades of spiritual experience, were powerfully reinforced

<sup>1</sup> Hog's *Memoirs*, p. 33 (Edin., 1756).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.



by the general acceptance of Hog's description of the Evangelical conversion.

Further, Hog possessed, in an eminent degree, that prophetic endowment referred to in the old Scottish Evangelicalism as "The Secret of the Lord," and which included providential guidance through some word of Scripture supernaturally borne in upon the soul, a divination of the secrets of the heart which roughly corresponds to the secular phenomenon of telepathy, and prophetic fore-knowledge of future events, whether of particular judgments, or of unexpected mercies. Hog's fame in this regard reached as far as London. The "Secret of the Lord," in this sense, was not uncommon among the "Men," and received a sustained and quite cogent defence from Dr. Kennedy.<sup>1</sup>

Referring to Hog's ability to stamp his own personality upon the souls of his disciples, the author of the *Memoirs* notes "that it was observable in (John Munro) that he carried a great Resemblance of Mr. Hog ever after, in a solid discerning of persons and spirits in Matters of Religion, as it was in several worthy persons who acknowledged Mr. Hog as their spiritual Father in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup> William Stewart of Inverness and Hog of Carnock were both impressed by the remarkable resemblance of disciple to master. "I must say that, except the great Mr. Thomas Hog, no person has tried me" says Hog of Carnock, "and went so much to the very bottom of my heart as he (John Munro) was directed to do, both as to the ground-work, and the most important concerns of a Christian life. . . . I thought I was at the feet of one of the old prophets, for besides a wonderful penetrating reach, his aspect was full of majesty and gravity."<sup>3</sup>

We get an intimate and revealing glimpse into the heart of the piety of the northern Covenanting Evangelicals when we read the *Spiritual Exercises of Catherine Collace* (Mrs. Ross). She was a friend and devoted disciple of Thomas Hog.<sup>4</sup> The continuity of that northern tradition is evidenced by the publication, in 1722, of the *Religious Letters of John Munro*, the Gospie carpenter, who, with his earlier namesake of Kiltearn, has the honour of being among the most notable of the early "Men."<sup>5</sup>

EARLY DEVELOPMENT.—For a generation after the Revolution settlement, the Highlands generally were occupied with bitter ecclesiastical strife. But in Easter Ross, and the east of Sutherland, there were, in a fair number of parishes, earnest little groups who, from the first, wel-

<sup>1</sup> Days of Fathers, Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Memoir of Hog, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95 : Memorials of C. Munro of Strathy, App. B.

<sup>4</sup> Edin., 1735.

<sup>5</sup> Collection of Fifty Religious Letters : Edin., 1722.

came the setting up of a Presbyterian ministry in their midst. And it is in Easter Ross that we find the first official step towards the revival of the fellowship meeting. In 1724, the Presbytery of Tain appointed meetings for prayer at Edderton, Tarbat, and Logie Easter.<sup>1</sup> In 1730, John Balfour was settled in Nigg. After Thomas Hog, he is the most important influence in the story of the "Men." Balfour reported that, between the years 1730 and 1739, there was a gradual heightening, "with stops and intermissions," in the spiritual temperature of the parish, and that, for several years before the notable revival which began in 1739, not only in Nigg, but in several of the neighbouring parishes, there had been a general meeting for prayer and spiritual conference which consisted only of the members of the Nigg session and a few others. Owing to an increase of numbers, it was necessary to divide it into two sections, each of which continued to grow. Besides the two general meetings presided over by the minister, ten other societies were formed in different parts of the parish. These met every Saturday for prayer and religious exercise and were presided over by an elder or experienced Christian."<sup>2</sup> Here we see the revival, under the stimulus of an evangelical awakening, of the praying society of Kiltearn, and of the Lowland fellowship meetings already discussed. As in their prototypes, the essential features, privacy, limitation of membership, and conference or discussion, were conserved. As an indication of the stress laid by Balfour on the fellowship meeting, it may be remarked that his only publication was *A Discourse concerning Religious Conference*.<sup>3</sup> And, as Prof. Blackie remarked about the fellowship meetings in his own day, "conference denotes exactly the only characteristic feature that can be found to distinguish a fellowship meeting from a common prayer meeting."<sup>4</sup> The privacy and limitation of membership had been dropped by then.

The private fellowship meeting, in which the "Men" also were the leading personalities, continued alongside of the public sacramental "Question Day" fellowship meeting throughout the 18th century; and it will be desirable briefly to notice their course. During the Easter Ross revival already referred to, which was more or less contemporary with the "work" at Kilsyth and Cambuslang, fellowship meetings were set up in Rosskeen, Rosemarkie, Golspie, Avoch, Alness, and Kilmuir Easter.<sup>5</sup> Through the visits of John Sutherland of Golspie and John Porteous of Kilmuir Easter, and possibly others, to Kilsyth and Cambuslang, where

<sup>1</sup> Tain Records, 1724.

<sup>2</sup> Gillies' *Historical Collections*, 1754, p. 453.

<sup>3</sup> Glasgow, 1745.

<sup>4</sup> Altavona, p. 352.

<sup>5</sup> Gillies' *Collections*.

the praying society was an essential part of the evangelistic machinery, a link was established between the southern and the northern movements.<sup>1</sup> Balfour gives us an inside glimpse of the Easter Ross meetings where "the Scriptures and other good books (are read), which they (the readers) translate currently as they read, and without any stop. . . . This way of reading is one of the exercises in the several weekly meetings . . . astonishing what a copious and pertinent use of the Scriptures many illiterate persons have acquired, and with what a readiness and fluency they pray in Scripture language."<sup>2</sup> From this reference, it is plain that the English Bible, and not Kirk's version of Bedell's Irish Bible, which, besides being scarce, would be almost incomprehensible in the Northern Highlands, was the version used by the leaders at the fellowship meetings. The same remained largely true of the Gaelic-preaching Highland ministers till the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>3</sup>

These private fellowship meetings, meeting weekly or monthly, continued in the evangelical parishes throughout the 18th century. In 1762, James Calder of Croy "spent an hour in sweet spiritual converse with a very young person . . . asking liberty to attend our monthly fellowship meeting, which was granted, as there was a promising appearance."<sup>4</sup> The following reference appears to be to fellowship meetings which were less formally part of the parochial organisation. "There were in some places family meetings on Sabbath evenings, at which portions of Scripture read in church were read over, and the texts rehearsed from which the sermons had been preached. All present . . . were invited to state as much of the sermons as they remembered . . . an elder presided. There are at least two houses in Easter Ross, the one in the parish of Tarbat, the other in the parish of Fearn, where weekly meetings for prayer have been held for more than two centuries."<sup>5</sup> Angus MacGillivray of Dairsie gives us a description of such informal fellowship meetings, apparently without any limitation of membership, as they were held in Strathnaver about the end of the 18th century. Here they supply the place of a Sunday evening service. "When the (morning) service is over, the several groups return each to their own hamlets, and after taking the necessary food, they meet in the house of one of the leading 'men.' He begins with prayer and praise; he then makes the people repeat all they remember of the sermon they have heard,

<sup>1</sup> Gillies' *Collections*, p. 448.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, J.: *State of Society and Knowledge in Highlands in 1745*, *passim*. (1827).

<sup>4</sup> Calder's *Diary*, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Religious Life in Ross*, p. 117.



throwing in practical remarks of his own . . . after a portion of the Catechism has been repeated, and the service closed with prayer, the people retire to their own homes to worship God in the family."<sup>1</sup>

On his first northern tour, in 1797, James Haldane, though depressed by the state of religion in the burgh of Dornoch, "was comforted to hear of the good that was done at prayer-meetings, which were instituted in a period when much of the power of godliness was experienced, and are still maintained in many parts of the county."<sup>2</sup> He also commends the fellowship meeting in Tain. He considered that the only vital religion in Caithness was that fostered by the "Men" who were grouped round the Achreny mission.<sup>3</sup> Robert Findlater tells how his father, on coming into Ross-shire as a young man, joined a fellowship meeting which appears to have kept more closely to the Lowland tradition of privacy and limited membership. "Such was the high spiritual enjoyment these men had together that they sometimes sat up during the night which they spent in acts of prayer and praise and spiritual conversation, on the marks of conversion, progressive holiness, and lamenting how little of them was seen in their day and generation."<sup>4</sup> As the membership was drawn from several parishes, this meeting or another similarly situated drew up a statement dated 17th September, 1788, explaining the causes which led to the formation of the society. These, briefly, were: personal deadness and decay, the deadness and decay of the day they lived in, the low state of church life, and forced settlements. Their rules were that each meeting was to choose a preses, none was to bring in any other person without the consent of the remainder, and they were to provoke one another to love and good works. They professed no divisive views, "nor do we make a faction."<sup>5</sup> It is stated that "from a ministerial meeting on the model of (this) 'Men's' meeting emanated the first proposal of a society for missions called The Northern Missionary Society."<sup>6</sup>

The private fellowship meetings were not always regarded as desirable by ecclesiastical authority. In 1737, the Synod of Caithness and Sutherland prohibited the public fellowship meetings which had begun, some years previously to occupy the Friday of the Communion season. These were immediately replaced by private meetings on the same day. On 27th June, 1739, the Synod agreed to change the Fast Day from

<sup>1</sup> *Sketches of Religion*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of a Tour*, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Memoir of Robert Findlater*, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Thursday to Friday. This was a blow to the private meetings. It was a challenge to the "Men," whose growing influence it was thought desirable to curb. The challenge was taken up, and in an intermittent conflict extending over a period of 20 years, the "Men" at last emerged victorious.<sup>1</sup> That there was something wrong with the fellowship meetings, both public and private, would seem to be borne out by the fact that several of the godliest ministers of the north, including John MacKay, Lairg, Alexander Pope of Reay, and John Sutherland of Golspie, approved the suppression.<sup>2</sup>

In 1749, the Presbytery of Tongue makes this reference to private fellowship meetings within their bounds: "There are in the several parishes some who take upon themselves to read the Scriptures and other books in the Irish language to the people, and to solve doubts and cases of conscience at these meetings, and that some of them are without the allowance of the minister of the parish, and that it is feared that such as do officiate are not well qualified for it, and the Presbytery remembering a melancholy scene that happened several years ago at Halmadary, did and hereby do prohibit any to convene the people to reading and conference except the advice and consent of the parish minister be obtained."<sup>3</sup> The strange event, known as "Tuiteam Halmadaraigh," or the Fall of Halmadary, appears to have taken place about 1740, and not towards the end of the 17th century, as suggested by Dr. George Henderson and Rev. N. MacKay.<sup>4</sup> The latter writer thought that the frustrated attempt to offer a human sacrifice at a fellowship meeting in Halmadary, Strathnaver, was due to a survival or recrudescence of Norse superstition. While there are certain features in the story which seem to support this contention, notably the reported presence of a large raven in the room where the meeting was held, it is much more likely to have been a case of obsession with the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. It may be relevant to point out that this incident took place during the ministry in Farr of John Skeldoch, a man who notoriously neglected his parish.

It were easy to make too much of occasional aberrations in the conduct of the fellowship meetings, or to attach undue importance to Presbyterial strictures on the spiritual inadequacy of the "Men" who led them. Inadequacies doubtless there were. But the private fellowship meeting was a good training ground for the lay leaders of a spiritual democracy. It flourished best where a sympathetic oversight tempered the necessary

<sup>1</sup> Beaton, D.: *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XXIX, p. 164 f.

<sup>2</sup> See *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XI, Diary of Murdo MacDonald.

<sup>3</sup> Tongue Pres. Rec.: *Old Lore Miscellany (Viking Club)*, 7, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Norse Influence in Celtic Scotland, p. 70: *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XX, p. 99.

liberty of conference. But quite a number of cases could be cited where such meetings, unsupported or opposed by ecclesiastical authority, kept alight the flame of true religion in parishes where there was no effective ministry.<sup>1</sup>

**PUBLIC SACRAMENTAL FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS.**—The olden Highland Evangelicalism was intensely sacramental. Despite the rarity of Communion, and the small numbers who communicated, the religious life of the people depended largely on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Donald Sage says: "In the north of Scotland a distinction prevailed in the annual administration of that ordinance which in the south was utterly unknown. That distinction was made between the public and the private or parochial administration of the Lord's Supper in any parish. The ordinance was considered as administered publicly when communicants from other parishes joined with those of the parish in its observance."<sup>2</sup> In Sutherland, prior to 1756, "the method of administering the Lord's Supper . . . was by having that ordinance once a year only in one parish in which all the country convened."<sup>3</sup> Wodrow, in the opening decades of the 18th century, takes note of the vast multitudes, taxing the economic resources if not the hospitable intentions of their hosts, who assembled to a communion in Ross and Sutherland.<sup>4</sup> The communions were held in the slack season between sowing and reaping, and were doubtless looked on as social as well as spiritual occasions. These great assemblies vastly extended the range of influence of popular preachers, served, in the absence of a standard Gaelic version of the Bible, to standardise the religious vocabulary, helped to unify and consolidate the Evangelical resources in a country where Episcopacy, paganism, and to a certain extent, Roman Catholicism had a strong hold, and not least, they provided opportunities of spiritual conference to the lay religious leaders, who were increasingly conscious of their responsibility and power.

At what date the fellowship meetings, which naturally occupied the Friday of a communion season, became public assemblies is not certain. What is certain is that by 1737 they had already become so important as to be regarded as a nuisance by ecclesiastical authority.<sup>5</sup> In that year they were suppressed by the Synod of Caithness and Sutherland. As the story of the subsequent conflict and of the eventual victory of the "Men" has been carefully and fully told by Rev. D. Beaton, it is unnecessary

<sup>1</sup> Religious Life in Ross, etc., *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> *Memorabilia Domestica*, p. 97 (2nd Ed.).

<sup>3</sup> *Old Lore Miscellany* (Viking Club), 7, p. 172: Tongue Pres. Rec.

<sup>4</sup> *Analecta*, IV, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Synod Record: *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XXIX, p. 164.



here to follow its course. It will be sufficient to state the reasons which influenced the Synod in their attempt to suppress the public fellowship meetings. The General Assembly had passed various acts, notably in 1712, 1724, and 1751, enjoining more frequent communions, and the multiplicity of preparatory services was a real bar to obedience. In times of scarcity, the great influx of visitors strained the resources of the people. A section of Evangelical opinion, represented by John Willison's *Sacramental Directory*, reminded the Church that it was the Apostolic custom to remember the Lord's death in His Supper each Lord's Day. Those of the clergy who disliked "enthusiasm," and whose own ministrations were not popular, seconded the movement for more frequent communions, in the hope that the great public communions would disappear. Further, the "Men," whose addresses occupied the Friday assemblies, proved too popular. Nor, according to some good judges, were they always wise in their harangues.<sup>1</sup> Murdo MacDonald of Durness speaks of the "Men" starting "frivolous or ill-stated questions," while the ministerial chairman allowed them "to ramble on in their indigested stuff."<sup>2</sup> In 1755, the Synod of Caithness and Sutherland, in answer to a petition from the elders and communicants of Dornoch, gave their opinion that "the (public fellowship) meetings have been accompanied with very considerable hurt and damage; they foster pride and vanity; they divert attention from things of the greatest importance . . . religion is very often discredited by the discourse of the persons (the "Men") . . ."<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that the representatives of the "Men" predicted that the continued suppression of the public fellowship meeting would occasion "a coolness betwixt several congregations and their ministers, the consequences of which may in time prove dangerous," while three of the ministers, who now took the popular side, reminded the Synod that "the people are in hazard by this deprivation to fall in with the wild and extravagant notions of the Secession."<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of "Separatism," which appeared in Sutherland and Caithness towards the end of the 18th century, has been traced to the "coolness" which was then generated.<sup>5</sup> Meantime, it may be asserted that, as a consequence of the action of the Commission of Assembly in 1758 in setting aside the Act of 1737 of the Synod of Caithness and Sutherland abolishing the sacramental fellowship meetings, the "Men's" meetings were even more firmly established. Their position was consolidated. Probably

<sup>1</sup> *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XI, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Beaton, D.: *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness*, XXIX, 178-182.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> MacLeod, J.: *North Country Separatists*, *passim*.

the "Men's" meetings were never more important or attracted a larger audience than during the era in the 19th century when the "Apostle of the North" was the spiritual king of the Highlands.

THE "MEN'S" MEETING—ITS GENERAL CHARACTER.—The public fellowship meetings were ostensibly conferences on practical divinity. The ancient forms, which distinguished a spiritual conference, were maintained. In theory, all the persons who attended were "anxious enquirers" who had come to seek light and counsel at a spiritual clinic. A minister always presided. After praise and prayer led by the presiding minister, the "question" was given out. "A believer who had difficulty about the interpretation of a certain portion of Scripture, or who was doubtful as to his being one of 'the afflicted and poor people' who 'shall trust in the Lord,' or as to his having 'passed from death into life,' or 'whether he was indeed born again,' gave out the passage of Scripture and asked for the *Marks* of those poor who trust, or of those who are brought to life, or are born again."<sup>1</sup> The presiding minister then gave a brief exposition of the passage, and called on the "Men" to speak. Dr. Kennedy, in reference to the greater assemblies, said: "Strangers only are called upon to speak"; "Not fewer than thirty will have spoken before the service is over."<sup>2</sup>

Eric Findlater has described a Friday meeting in the pre-Disruption parish of Durness. Of the audience he says: "It might amount to upward of 1000, and of all ages. There might be seen an occasional sheep farmer, if a native of the district, but never a factor. There might also be seen the old and hardened in sin and the thoughtless youth; in short, the various elements of which an ordinary congregation is composed." Each speaker, while "professing his own unsuitableness for the service, gives what he thinks are true marks—generally from his own experience—and to this it is owing that there is generally so little hesitation in these extempore effusions." "It is not theoretical but practical divinity that is given forth."<sup>3</sup> Generally, the speakers bore witness to their own conflicts with Satan, and to the Lord's dealings with their own souls. The temper of the meetings varied. Some were wholly edifying. Others were largely given over to destructive criticisms and denunciations. Angus Morrison, Bayble (Lewis), having paid a round of visits to sacramental occasions in Sutherland and Caithness, was "pained to find the note of bitter criticism which featured the 'Men's' speaking. That note was at that time unknown in Lewis."<sup>4</sup> Much depended on whether the

<sup>1</sup> MacLean, D.: *Duthil, Past and Present*, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Days of Fathers*, p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> *Annals of Disruption*, p. 670.

<sup>4</sup> Macfarlane, N.: *Men of Lewis*, p. 91.

chairman exercised a wise control over the speakers. Some of the ministers were too weak or too timid to deal firmly with "Men" who were gifted with bitter tongues and had a large popular following. John Grant, the famous "Man" of Kildonan, having been warned by Dr. Mackintosh of Tain that he would be called upon to speak, but that he would not be allowed the usual privilege of a general denunciation, replied that he must speak as the Holy Spirit gave him utterance. "Do you think, John, that all the nonsense that goes through your brain is of the Holy Spirit?" retorted Dr. Mackintosh. It is recorded that Grant, on this occasion, gave a most edifying and seemly address.<sup>1</sup> A good many of the pregnant sayings of the "Men" on these occasions became part of the Evangelical tradition, and were quoted far and wide. In the good little book, whose English title is *Gleanings in the Fields*, George Beaton has given us the summaries of addresses given by "Men" at communions in different parts of Lewis and the Northern Highlands, during the seventies of last century.<sup>2</sup> These addresses are solid in substance, and gracious in spirit, and from what we know of the speaking of the best of the "Men" during the earlier period, we are led to believe that these represent the central tradition of the Friday Fellowship Meeting oratory.

THE MEN'S ATTITUDE TO CHURCH AND MINISTRY.—The "Men" were conscious of belonging to a definite, extensive, and powerful brotherhood. It is therefore possible to speak of their class attitude to Church and Ministry. A hostile critic says: "Ordination of any sort has no value in their eyes."<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is nonsense. Even the most extreme of the "Separatists" valued the sacraments, and received Baptism, and occasionally even the Lord's Supper at the hands of ministers of the National Church. The attitude of the general body of the "Men" may be summed up in Taylor Innes' words: "The maximum of respect for the office (of the ministry) rightly filled, and the minimum for the mere official."<sup>4</sup> In this, the people as a whole took their cue from the "Men." The great majority of the "Men" were opposed to what became known as "radical" or "separatist" principles.<sup>5</sup> They were loyal to the Church and the Ministry. Their antipathy to Moderatism, patronage, or even to an uncongenial Evangelicalism might prove stronger than their regard for the visible Church. This was combined with a hearty dislike of Secession principles. Says the biographer of Dr. MacGregor of Pictou, the pioneer Gaelic colonial missionary: "The Secession was

<sup>1</sup> *Far North Memories: A Gleaning*, by Dr. J. MacLeod, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Dioghluimean 's na h Achaibh*.

<sup>3</sup> *Quarterly Review*, 1851, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> *B. and F. Evang. Review*, 1872, p. 439.

<sup>5</sup> *Annals of Disruption*, p. 675: MacGillivray's *Sketches*, etc.



little known in the Highlands except by unfavourable report, and those (emigrants) who came from that quarter were not only attached to the Church of Scotland, but many had a blind prejudice, and an ignorant bigotry regarding the ministers of any other body."<sup>1</sup>

But in the case of unpopular settlements (of ministers) in the homeland, "several of the most enlightened and judicious of the "Men" felt it their duty to *secede* from their parish churches and seek for spiritual instruction in those parishes where they conceived they would be most benefited. Such was the high ground they took, that as an act of consistency they would not even receive or partake of sealing ordinances from those ministers they would not hear. These men were called *Seceders*, though still continuing members of the Church of Scotland."<sup>2</sup> "If any man of this stamp (a Moderate) says Angus MacGillivray, "was settled in the parish where they (the 'Men') lived, they would not sit under his ministry; they believed that in doing so, they were putting their souls in peril, and rather than do it, they walked 10 or 12 miles on the Sabbath morning to the church of the nearest Evangelical minister."<sup>3</sup> In Charles Calder's time, the ferryboat carrying such "Seceders" from Kiltarn to Ferintosh became known as the "Gospel packet."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, MacGillivray testifies: "If the 'Men' believed that the minister was sent by Christ, and that his heart was in his work . . . these men . . . looked up to him and encouraged his heart in the Lord . . . there was in them a beautiful combination of faithfulness and tenderness."<sup>5</sup> There can be little doubt but that this conditional loyalty was a source of weakness to the Highland church. "Wherever an unacceptable minister filled the pulpit of a parish . . . all the ordinary Presbyterian rules and remedies were at once and simply neglected. The body of elders and spiritual overseers did nothing, and the people treated the parish as non-existent. . . . There was simply an extravasation of the people into and upon adjacent parts, and that only where there was some individual attraction."<sup>6</sup> So Taylor Innes, and his generalisation is, on the whole justified.

The phenomenon of "Separatism," which appeared in Kildonan during the nineties of the 18th century, and rapidly spread north to Caithness and south as far as Duthil, was but an accentuation, sometimes almost amounting to caricature, of the "Men's" conditional loyalty to,

<sup>1</sup> Patterson, G.: *Memoir of J. MacGregor*, p. 415 (Philadelphia, 1859).

<sup>2</sup> *Memoir of R. Findlater*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Sketches*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *R. Findlater*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Sketches*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *B. and F. Evang. Review*, 1872, p. 443.

and relative detachment from, the organised church. Despite the protests of Dr. Kennedy and Angus MacGillivray, the "Separatists," who numbered among them such famous names as John Grant, Joseph MacKay, Alexander Gair, and Peter Stewart, must be accorded their rightful place among the general body of the "Men."<sup>1</sup>

The "Separatists" went a step further than the "Seceders," who, though they would not "hear" their own parish minister, sought spiritual nurture under neighbouring ministers of the Establishment. The "Separatists," on the other hand, set up rival services, which met at canonical hours, and proselytised from the parish church. When Norman MacLeod, who, in later years, became one of the most romantic and colourful figures in colonial church history, led the separatist movement in the parish of Assynt during the time that John Kennedy, later the famous minister of Killearnan, and father of Dr. Kennedy, Dingwall, was assistant there, he emptied the parish church of all but two of its communicants.<sup>2</sup> The causes which led these "Men" to take up their "separatist" attitude were varied, and sometimes trivial. In the case of Norman MacLeod, and doubtless also of others, it was the urge to find a sphere where his capacity for leadership would find more satisfying expression than within the discipline and decorum of the National Church. Their relation to the Church has been thus stated: "They did not look upon themselves as breaking away from its communion, though they had a way of speaking of their brethren as the church. They absented themselves from the parish church. They held their own meetings, and that at canonical hours, so that they were rivals to the ordinary services of the church. But the separatists attended communion services, though it might often happen that they did not communicate, and they got the ordinance of baptism from the ministers of the church."<sup>3</sup>

These "Men" had the misfortune to receive hostile attention from both Moderate and Evangelical sources. Constitutional Evangelicals were aware of their critical attitude to the policy which finally led to the Disruption, and also resented their hostile attitude to such pious ministers as John Kennedy and George Davidson of Latheron.<sup>4</sup> Moderate critics charged the whole body of the "Men" with the moral and spiritual faults which they discerned among certain of the "Separatists."<sup>5</sup> The constitutional Evangelicals rebutted the general accusation, and charged

<sup>1</sup> See *North Country Separatists*.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kennedy's *Minister of Killearnan*: Days of Fathers, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> *North Country Separatists*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Annals of Disruption*, p. 679, etc.

<sup>5</sup> *Church and Her Accuser in the Far North*, by Dr. Phin, etc.

the residuum of undeniable guilt upon the shoulders of the "Separatists."<sup>1</sup> Dr. Alex. MacKay gives a sketch of the Latheron "Men," mostly of separatist tendencies, which is worth quoting: "We entertained the greatest veneration for their persons, and unbounded admiration for their piety, zeal, and self-denial. . . . Our general estimate of them as a class, then, is that we have nowhere seen their equal in regard to several beautiful traits of Christian character—especially their marvellous gift of prayer, their reverence for the Bible, their strict Sabbath observance, their gratitude for God's bounties and their love for one another. Yet we were not then . . . wholly blinded to their faults or infirmities. Foremost amongst these was their hostile attitude they assumed towards the Christian ministry, greatly weakening the pastors' hands and lessening their moral influence. With a few noble exceptions, they were uncharitable and censorious and wholly incapable of giving credit to those who differed from them for generous and conscientious motives."<sup>2</sup> We get some idea of their fervency of faith, their strenuous spiritual life, their exaltations and self-abasements, their pride and their humility, their bitter censoriousness towards those outside and their touching tenderness to one another in some of their letters which have survived, and in the spiritual songs of the Forres collection,<sup>3</sup> It has been said that the great majority of them were swept into the Free Church at the Disruption.<sup>4</sup>

#### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS.

1. *Knowledge of Scriptures.*—As a class, the "Men's" knowledge of the Scriptures was profound. This is as true of the 18th century, when the Gaelic Bible, except in Kirk's version, was non-existent, as it was in the following century. Alexander Morrison "differed from all the 'Men' of the Lews in one respect. He had a keen taste for literature. . . . The most of the 'Men' were . . . men of one book."<sup>5</sup> A retentive memory, and the lack of other reading material, combined with their intense spiritual concentration, made them mighty in the Scriptures. Of Colin Sutherland, Helmsdale, it was said: "Though quite unable to read, he was possessed of a powerful mind and retentive memory. If any person reading the Bible missed or mispronounced a word, he

<sup>1</sup> "Vindicator" in *John o' Groats Journal*, 20th Sept. - 1st Nov., 1850: Days of Fathers, p. 84; MacGillivray's *Sketches*, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Life and Times of G. Davidson, pp. 180-182.

<sup>3</sup> Letters of the Eminently Pious John Grant, Joseph MacKay, and Alexander Gair: Aberd., n.d.: *Dain Spioradail le Ughdaraibh Eugsamhail*, Forres, 1852.

<sup>4</sup> *Annals of the Disruption*.

<sup>5</sup> *Men of Lewis*, p. 62.



would correct him."<sup>1</sup> Of two of the first generation of the "Men" of Skye, Dr. Roderick MacLeod of Snizort said: "That had the Bible gone amissing, it would almost be found in these two men."<sup>2</sup>

2. *Interpretation of Scripture*.—As exegetes, they belonged to the Alexandrian school. They loved the allegorical and hidden meaning. The "Men" of Latheron "delivered an address or exhortation founded, to some extent, on the portion of Scripture read—usually giving it a highly allegorical interpretation, and such as, we feel persuaded, the inspired author never thought of."<sup>3</sup> "Saul was anointed out of a phial . . . a brittle vessel. David was anointed with oil from a horn; even should this vessel fall, it would not break."<sup>4</sup> The cock which crew when Peter denied his Master, was interpreted to mean "the cock of Peter's conscience."<sup>5</sup> And, when David danced before the Lord, he only "danced in his heart."<sup>6</sup> Some of the great masters of the Highland pulpit loved and successfully practised the allegorical interpretation. John Porteous, preaching on "the hidden man of the heart," made illustrative use of the Ark of the Covenant, and laid special emphasis in the outward covering of badger's skin which protected the Ark from the weather. "Like the Ark in the Holy of Holies, the hidden man of the heart, which was the work of grace in the soul, was protected from the severity of the weather from whatever direction the storm came. The righteousness of Christ covered the work, and shielded it from every storm."<sup>7</sup> The allegorical and typological interpretation can be put to noble and edifying use, but it suffers from the obvious peril that, through its medium, Scripture should become a nose of wax.

3. *Mystical and allegorical modes of speech*.—The "dark saying" or "dubhchainnt" was much practised and prized. The kernel was all the sweeter when the hard shell had first to be broken. A certain pious, though stolid, person was shocked when the aged and saintly James MacDonald of Reay asked him if there were pipers and witches in the place he came from. "There were pipers there once, and if I could hear them again, old and blind as I am, they would make me dance; and then the witches that there were there in those days would take the substance out of every word."<sup>8</sup> He meant that not only were there

<sup>1</sup> *Men of Sutherland*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Men of Skye*, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> *Life and Times of G. Davidson*.

<sup>4</sup> *Duthil: Past and Present*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen, D.: *Gleanings in the North*, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Religious Life in Ross*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Far North Memories: A Gleaning*, p. 15.

great and lively preachers, but also discerning hearers whose senses were exercised, and who would sip the cream of the sincere milk of the Word. "What kind of minister do you want to come after me?" asked Finlay Cook when he was leaving Cross in Lewis. "A dead dog at the king's table," was the reply. That is, one who thought as little of himself as Mephibosheth did, and yet had found a place at the table of the Great King.<sup>1</sup> More plainly allegorical: "In times of prosperity in the Church, the Lord's servants ploughed with four horses, Faith, Love, Discernment, and Zeal; but as the Church declined, Faith became lame, Love got sick, Discernment lost the sight of one eye, and Zeal died; so that many now do the work with the two horses of carnal reason and human learning."<sup>2</sup> An example of the spiritual riddle, whose secular counterpart has always been popular in the Highlands. A stranger said to Robert Sutherland, Strathbrora: "Name to me something that never was, is not, and never will be." The answer: "A child without the new birth in my Father's house."<sup>3</sup>

4. *Power in Prayer*.—Much of the popular influence of the "Men" sprang from their peculiar intimacy at the throne of grace, and their might in prayer. In their prayers, petition, Scripture text, and more or less apposite commentary were intermingled. The "Men" might be graded in popular esteem according to their gifts. John MacCowan was esteemed to be "coigeamh fear-urnuigh an Eilean Sgitheanaich" (the fifth praying-man in Skye).<sup>4</sup> Some of the prayers might be of great length. "The last of their meetings I was in," said John Campbell, the Edinburgh Evangelical ironmonger, on the occasion of a visit to a fellowship meeting in Inverness about 1800, "began at nine o'clock at night, and William Fraser prayed more than an hour. But such a prayer! Another hour of it would have been no burden to either a Christian or a poet."<sup>5</sup> Alexander Ross (Og), the godly weaver of Edderton, remained in prayer for three days on the hill of Edderton.<sup>6</sup> Of Hugh Man, Creich, it has been said: "Whether walking on the high road, or working in the field, he was continually engaged in prayer, and almost always in an audible voice."<sup>7</sup> The prayerfulness of the seer of Shawbost "was the wonder of the community. He rose long before dawn, that like his Lord, he might hold communion with God."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Far North Memories*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> MacKay, D.: *Memories of our Parish*, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> *Men of Sutherland*, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Men of Skye*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Philip's *Life of John Campbell*, p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> *Religious Life in Ross*, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> *Men of Sutherland*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> *Men of Lewis*, 143.

5. *Conversion and Assurance*.—As has already been said, the "Men," generally speaking, regarded as valid only that type of conversion experience which Thomas Hog has so fully analysed in his *Abstract*. It is sufficient to quote one example, from the mid period of the 18th century. Hugh Ross, Kilmuir Easter, a powerful handsome youth, with youth's vanity, went to Fearn Communion, to display a new Highland dress. During the sermon, "an arrow, shot at a venture, found a joint in the proud youth's harness and pierced his heart. Deep were his convictions thereafter, and for months he walked under the shadow of death." Each Sabbath found him at church, but he would not venture to cross the threshold. In sunshine or rain or snow, he kept his post, heedless of weather, till one Sabbath of snow and drift, an aged and godly elder in pity crept up to him and thrust him across the threshold and shut him in. "But his time of deliverance had not come, and in proportion to his former bondage was the thoroughness of his liberty. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Severe "lawwork" was regarded as desirable, if not indeed necessary. One well-known "Man" not having experienced much "lawwork," questioned whether he were in reality one who feared the Lord, and prayed that the Lord might apply the "law" with power to his soul. A wise soul-friend "prayed that the Lord might not grant his request, because he could not stand but a measure of it." <sup>2</sup> Another eminent "Man" began to doubt the genuineness of his Christian state for the same reason. He was encouraged by the same director thus: "The Lord would not apply a hatchet where the work could be done by a penknife." <sup>3</sup> Thus, among the "Men" themselves there arose those who corrected the extreme rigour of Hog's scheme.

Numerous critics have charged the "Men" with cultivating an undue *subjectivity* in their religion. "It is a mistake to suppose, as many have done," says MacGillivray, "that they made religion to consist in doubting their own salvation." There can be little doubt, however, that many notable Christians laid tardy hands on personal assurance of salvation, and were unduly preoccupied with "frames and feelings." Dr. Taylor, the biographer of C. C. Mackintosh, points out that this tendency, native perhaps to the Highlander, was strengthened by the fact that "the fellowship meeting . . . assumed, we know not how early, a one-sided character, the questions discussed . . . being exclusively questions of self-examination, and the subjects being invariably in one form or another, the distinctive marks of true grace." <sup>4</sup> One could cite fairly

<sup>1</sup> *Days of Fathers*, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> *Religious Life in Ross*, 141.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>4</sup> *Memorials of C. C. Mackintosh*, Introd.



numerous instances of men who possessed an untroubled serenity of soul, but Alex. Gair is nearer the normal experience when he says: "I have nothing but a Bethel here, and a Bochim there."<sup>1</sup> The same applies to some of the famous ministers. The diary of James Calder of Croy reveals swift changes from extreme exaltation to a condition of spiritual desertion. The best evidence for the interior life of the "Men" of the 18th century is probably the body of spiritual verse which they created, and which is to be found in Rose's *Metrical Reliques of the Men*. Compared with the spiritual poets of the southern Highlands, the northern poets are definitely more subjective in their preoccupations.<sup>2</sup>

6. *Spiritual exclusiveness*.—The "Men" maintained a certain austerity of behaviour, not only to the ungodly, but to the young convert. "These worthies did not give instant credit, nor receive into instant fellowship, those under religious impressions. They required the trial and test that is afforded by time."<sup>3</sup> In Skye, three years was regarded as a suitable probationary period.<sup>4</sup> This was because "they knew something of the greatness and all importance of the work of grace in the soul, the proneness of the natural heart to accept and be satisfied with a counterfeit, and the desirableness for God's glory, and for the welfare and comfort of the church that her communion be kept pure."<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, however, the result of such austerity was to cast the diffident and trembling disciple into despair. Donald Sutherland, the godly saddler of Thurso, took to his bed in distress of mind after a ruthless cross-examination of his spiritual state by Norman MacLeod of Assynt.<sup>6</sup> Occasionally this exclusiveness was carried to extravagant lengths. John Grant asked: "Where can you show me one that has been born again in Scotland these last twenty-five years?"<sup>7</sup> John Tait, Halkirk, represents the normal attitude: "Knowing well the craft of Satan and the subtlety of *self* in its varying forms, he was at pains to watch over their (young converts) conduct, directing and counselling them, yet not receiving hastily into avowed fellowship."<sup>8</sup> To modern eyes, this exclusiveness is the least attractive of the traits of the "Men," but it may be doubted whether the modern alternative, a genial and universal inclusiveness, is the correct solution of the problem.

<sup>1</sup> Letters of John Grant, Joseph MacKay, and A. Gair; 72.

<sup>2</sup> Inverness, 1851.

<sup>3</sup> *Ministers and Men of Far North*, 142.

<sup>4</sup> *Men of Skye*, 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Ministers and Men*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> *North Country Separatists*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Far North Memories: A Gleaning*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ministers and Men*, 175.

7. "Witnessing."—Auld says: "Some of the leading 'Men' . . . would frequently diverge from the 'question' to make reflections on the presiding ministers, simply for this reason, that under the system of patronage, men had been put into parishes whose doctrine was often erroneous and always feeble, and whose conduct was for the most part extremely lax; and the 'Men' having on Friday an opportunity of testifying against such to their faces, took advantage of it."<sup>1</sup> Once the habit took root, however, unworthy ministers were by no means the sole object of approbrium. The extremists were especially given to testifying. "The degeneracy of the times was much insisted on; the prevailing fashions in dress were vigourously condemned; and, on every occasion, intruded ministers were held up to scorn and ridicule."<sup>2</sup> On one occasion Alex. Gair rose to address the assembly (Men's meeting), but instead of speaking to the question, he denounced ministers, elders, catechists, and members of churches . . . "<sup>3</sup> The letters of John Grant, etc., contain some refreshing examples of plain speaking, as when Gair refers to "Satan and his emissaries, the belly god ministers, and Doeg elders, and the cursed Gehazi catechists," or when Joseph MacKay refers to a certain parish "harrowed by a wicked presbytery, under plots and plans of a hellish committee in Edinburgh," or when the same man congratulates a parish "on their singular mercy in having no settled minister to ride over their privileges."<sup>4</sup> While it cannot be said that the habit of "witnessing" ever died out (after all, there is sometimes occasion for it), it is clear that the best of the "Men" reacted against uncharitable "witnessing." "I would rather hate sin for three minutes," said Roderick MacLeod, Bayble, "than abuse it for three years."<sup>5</sup>

8. *The Secret of the Lord*.—The "Men" of the classical period of the "Days of the Fathers," inheriting the tradition of Thomas Hog, and John Caird Munro, possessed, or were firmly believed by themselves and the people to possess "a singular intimacy of fellowship (at the throne of grace) evidenced not only by the unction resting on their own spirits, but in their obtaining special direction in the perplexities of themselves and others, and in receiving intimations of the Lord's mind as to present and future events in providence."<sup>6</sup> Dr. Kennedy based his elaborate defence of this endowment on the scripture text: "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him." He says: "By means

<sup>1</sup> *Ministers and Men*, 174.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of George Davidson*, 184.

<sup>3</sup> *Stephen's Gleanings in the North*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Letters of J. Grant, etc.

<sup>5</sup> *Men of Lewis*, 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ministers and Men*, 143.

of the written Word, the Lord may give intimations of His will in a way very much different from direct inspiration of prophecy, and ends are served by such communications of His mind that make it far from improbable that the Lord may have given them."<sup>1</sup> This is a feature of the religious experience of the "Men" which connects it closely with Covenanting Evangelicalism, not to speak of the piety of the Columban Church. The *Memoirs of Mrs. Veitch*, and the biographies of the *Six Saints of the Covenant* give many instances of providential guidance by means of the Written Word. Thomas Hog, with his usual precision, sets forth the conditions to be fulfilled before he accepted supernatural guidance by the medium of texts brought impressively home upon the soul. "When any word of Scripture was brought to his mind, as suiting any case he was exercised about, he would not close with it till he had examined the same and found it from God. . . . It is only in the word wherein is clear light, and by the Spirit's opening the eyes to discern this light and giving sight to discern this light, that we are to expect any solid instructions, directions and comfort."<sup>2</sup> The recorded instances of this prophetic faculty are numerous, weighty, and of good authenticity. Through this medium, a "Man," or godly minister, might receive knowledge of the hidden thoughts of another's heart, or whether he was indeed one of the Lord's people. He might receive assurance regarding the safety of those in peril, or intimation of judgment to fall upon some sinner. Or he might be asked, as James MacGregor was by the Highlanders of Pictou, to tell the whereabouts of a stray horse, or to lay his hands on a sick cow.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside of, and complementary to, this peculiar intimacy with the mind of God, we notice that the "Men" were much in conflict with the Enemy of Souls. They "were not ignorant of Satan's devices." He might appear in corporeal form. Donald Roy, one of the earliest of the "Men" of Nigg, "saw what seemed to be a black dog trotting by his side." "Ah," he exclaimed, "and so I have got company. I ought to have guessed sooner."<sup>4</sup> Norman MacLeod, one of the famous "Men of Skye," when assailed by the Tempter, used to exclaim, "Shame on you, Satan, is that your work now, who was once an angel of light?"<sup>5</sup> The traditional life of David Ross, the "Christian Hero of the North," gives us vivid glimpses of the "Men's" grim encounters with the Devil.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Days of Fathers*, Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Memoir of Hog, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Memoir of J. MacGregor, 258.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Miller's *Scenes and Legends*, 146.

<sup>5</sup> *Men of Skye*, 77.

<sup>6</sup> Sinclair, J.: *Christian Hero of the North*, Edin., 1867.



The Christian life was thus, not only a walk with God, but a ceaseless war with Satan even to the end.

We may sum up our thoughts on the religion of the "Men" by using words which Taylor Innes applied to Highland Evangelicalism as a whole: "Unquestionably in its day a very powerful manifestation of Christianity, and intense and vivid illustration of vital piety."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *B. and F. Evang. Review*, 1872, p. 419.

